

## **“If you treat me right, I reciprocate”: Examining the role of exchange in organizational survey response**

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### **Summary**

Survey nonresponse can pose a major threat to the generalizability of organizational survey findings. This paper examines whether organizational members' evaluations of their organizational experiences affect survey response to organizationally sponsored surveys. In particular, we hypothesized that perceived organizational support, social exchange, procedural justice and an individual's inclination to feel exploited in social relationships predicted organizational members' compliance with organizations' requests for survey completion. A longitudinal field experiment conducted in collaboration with the Office of Institutional Research at a large university (sample:  $n = 622$  university students) supported the hypotheses. Organizational members who consciously decided to not participate in organizational surveys perceived their organization as less procedurally just and less supportive. They also reported negative perceptions of their social exchange relationship with their organization, and were more inclined to feel exploited in relationships. Hence, an exchange-oriented theoretical framework grounded in organizational citizenship behavior theory seems appropriate for the study of survey nonresponse. Implications for survey practice include that survey-based findings are unlikely to generalize to specific groups of nonrespondents, and that techniques commonly used to increase response rates may not be effective in reaching these groups of nonrespondents. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

### **Introduction**

Survey nonresponse is a rather neglected stepchild in organizational behavior research. Few theory-driven studies have explicitly examined and explained why some organizational members respond to organizational surveys while others fail to comply with organizations' requests for survey completion. At the same time, survey nonresponse can, if nonrespondents differ from respondents on any of the variables of interest, severely threaten the generalizability of sample-based findings to the population

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(Dillman, 1991) and hence introduce nonresponse bias. If nonresponse bias is present, the use of sample-based survey research findings for the development of organization-wide interventions or for knowledge generation may be questionable. Based on past research, (Rogelberg et al., 2003) we know that organizational members who decide to not participate in surveys have lower levels of satisfaction and commitment than those who respond and those who do not respond due to reasons other than not wanting to participate (e.g., high time commitments, low conscientiousness). Still, the reasons for attitudinal differences between respondents and those who refuse to participate remain puzzling.

To date, little theory-driven research has examined why some organizational members decide to comply with their organization's request for survey completion, while others fail to participate. In order to provide a theory-grounded explanation for differences between respondents and nonrespondents, we propose a social exchange framework for the study of survey nonresponse to organizational surveys that are sponsored by the organization (e.g., university, employer). More specifically, we use individuals' organizational experiences to study and explain survey response behavior.<sup>1</sup>

Drawing from the research literature on organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Organ, 1988; Organ & Ryan, 1995; Youssefnia, 2000), we examine a theory positing that individuals' experiences of fair decision-making processes, or procedural justice (Colquitt & Greenberg, 2003; Greenberg, 1990; Thibaut & Walker, 1975), the level of organizational support they experience (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986), and their social exchange relationships (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993) can explain organizational members' survey response behavior. In addition, we examine whether individuals' inclination to reciprocate if they are granted support, or their reciprocation wariness, further influences survey response. The integration of justice, social exchange, and perceived organizational support theories seems warranted because, although the three theories may lead to similar predictions about survey response behavior, there is both conceptual and empirical evidence supporting the discriminant validity of the constructs (e.g., Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

If survey completion is in fact a consequence of an individual's organizational experiences, then two major implications arise for organizational survey practice and for research on procedural justice, reciprocity, and exchange in organizations. First, if organizational survey response is a result of positive organizational experiences, then samples obtained in organizational surveys may be biased because they fail to obtain information about nonrespondents. Hence, they may fail to account for the opinions and attitudes of those with weak social exchange relationships with their organization. As a consequence, those most dissatisfied with their organizational experiences may not voice their opinions in organizational surveys. Second, organizational research on justice (Colquitt & Greenberg, 2003), reciprocity (Cotterell, Eisenberger, & Speicher, 1992; Eisenberger, Cotterell, & Marvel, 1987), and exchange (Rousseau & McLean Parks, 1993; Shore, Tetrick, Lynch, & Barksdale, in press) assumes that organizational sample data is representative of the populations' perceptions of their exchange relationships. However, if individuals who perceive low procedural justice, low levels of organizational support and weak social exchange are less likely to respond to organizational surveys, then past justice and exchange research may possibly be subject to nonresponse bias. Namely, those who evaluate their experiences negatively would not be included in organizational samples. As a result, research on justice, perceived organizational support (POS) and exchange relationships may be subjected to range restriction.

In this paper, we first review past research on antecedents of nonresponse. We then develop a framework of organizational experiences as precursors of nonresponse by reviewing research on procedural justice, perceived organizational support and social exchange in organizations. Next, we discuss the

<sup>1</sup>Note that in this study we do not attempt to examine the effects of characteristics of participant recruitment and survey design, which has been examined in much detail by others (Schaefer & Dillman, 1998). Instead, this study holds factors of participant recruitment and survey design constant.

inclusion of a reciprocity-oriented personality variable in our framework. We test our framework with the objective of identifying organizational experiences and reciprocity-oriented personality dimensions that can predict nonresponse using population profiling methodology (Rogelberg et al., 2003) in a longitudinal field experiment.

### *Antecedents of survey nonresponse<sup>2</sup>*

What motives for nonresponse and differences between nonrespondents and respondents have been detected in past research? Previous research on nonresponse to organizational surveys has examined the role of demographic, attitudinal, personality, and survey characteristics as antecedents of survey nonresponse. Demographically, females (Green, 1996), Caucasians (Jackson & Ivanoff, 1999), as well as older (Green, 1996; Moum, 1994) and more educated (Green, 1996) individuals seem more likely to respond (Gannon, Northern, & Carroll, 1971; Rogelberg et al., 2003) to requests for survey completion. Survey content also affects response behavior, with people being more likely to participate in research on a topic of interest to them (McDaniel, Madden, & Verille, 1987). The search for attitudinal differences has provided evidence for differences in satisfaction between respondents and nonrespondents (e.g., Rogelberg, Luong, Sederburg, & Cristol, 2000; Rogelberg et al., 2003). Moreover, respondents seem to be more loyal and committed to their organization (Donald, 1960; Rogelberg et al., 2000).

From a personality perspective, respondents seem to differ from nonrespondents in that they are more conscientious than passive nonrespondents and more agreeable and conscientious than active nonrespondents. Passive nonrespondents differ from active nonrespondents in that if asked on an initial survey, they state intentions to complete future surveys, while active nonrespondents explicitly state that they have no intentions to complete organizational surveys. Ultimately, both active and passive nonrespondents do not complete follow-up surveys (Rogelberg et al., 2003). Altogether, the vast majority of characteristics that distinguish nonrespondents and respondents do not directly explain *why* some individuals decide to respond to organizational surveys while others do not. In other words, individual difference antecedents and organizational experiences have not yet been sufficiently researched as possible causes of survey nonresponse.

### *A social exchange/OCB perspective on survey nonresponse*

Our knowledge of individuals' rationale for responding or not responding to organizational surveys remains fragmented and should be informed by our knowledge of antecedents of other helping behaviors in organizations. In fact, some researchers have speculated that survey response behavior may constitute a form of organizational citizenship behavior because it is discretionary and not part of individuals' regular organizational duties (Organ, 1988; Rogelberg et al., 2003; Youssefnia, 2000). In fact, survey response is similar to organizational citizenship behaviors geared toward enhancing the organization's functioning, an OCB factor that has been labeled generalized compliance or OCB-O (Williams & Anderson, 1991). However, research on OCBs has persuasively demonstrated that helping behaviors in organizations are not solely a result of individuals' personality characteristics and attitudes, but also a consequence of organizational experiences or exchange relationships between organizational members and their organization (Organ & Ryan, 1995).

Hence, the theory-grounded study of survey nonresponse and the quest for reasons why individuals decide to not complete organizational surveys should be expanded and include the investigation of

<sup>2</sup>For a thorough discussion of methodologies used to examine differences between respondents and nonrespondents, see Rogelberg et al. (2003), and Rogelberg and Luong (1998).

positive and negative organizational experiences. Specifically, we propose that survey response is a contribution (i.e., a resource) provided to the organization as repayment for the receipt of some inducement (i.e., a resource). Drawing on Foa and Foa (1975), we suggest that survey response is an informational resource or contribution because participation is a way for members to contribute to organizational effectiveness. In order to argue for the role of organizational experiences and social exchange in survey response behavior and nonresponse, we next review the literature relating procedural justice, perceived organizational support, social exchange, and the dispositional variable reciprocity to helping behaviors in organizations to develop an exchange-based framework for the study of survey nonresponse.

### *Organizational experiences as predictors of survey response and nonresponse*

#### **Procedural justice**

Organizational members who feel their organization's decision-making processes are unfair may view noncompliance with requests to participate in organizational surveys as a means of "paying back." In fact, survey response behavior may be an act of revenge, motivated by perceived inattentiveness or lack of respect by the organization (Bies; 2005; Tyler & Lind, 2001), or provoked by "violations of rules, norms, and promises" (Bies & Tripp, 2005, p. 71). Whether individuals provide help to their organization by completing surveys may be influenced by their perceptions that the organization is treating them procedurally just, or whether they feel decision processes are fair (Colquitt, 2001; Leventhal, Karuza, & Fry, 1980).

Various studies on procedural justice support the notion that procedural justice is an antecedent of helping behaviors in organizations. Although Organ (1988) initially proposed just and fair processes to be a determinant of organizational members' likelihood to engage in OCBs, more recent literature has shed light on the specific relationships between procedural justice and OCBs (Aryee, Chen, & Bhudwar, 2004). Here, we suggest that procedurally just policies may contribute to organizational members' willingness to complete organizational surveys. As survey response can be perceived as a mechanism of assisting the organization by engaging in a certain form of OCB which has been labeled "voice" behavior (VanDyne, Cummings, & Parks, 1995), it is conceivable that organizational members view survey response as a way of reciprocating to their organization by engaging in survey response behavior. Thus, we hypothesized organizational members' perceptions of procedural justice to predict whether they respond to organizational surveys or whether they refuse to comply with requests for survey completion.

Past research found no attitudinal differences between respondents and passive nonrespondents (Rogelberg et al., 2003), indicating that the two groups share certain perceptions. Thus, we proposed that passive nonrespondents (Rogelberg et al., 2003) do not differ from respondents in their perceptions of procedural justice. In contrast, we anticipated active nonrespondents, or those who consciously decide to not participate in organizational surveys, to not comply because they feel their organization is not procedurally just.

*Hypothesis 1: Active nonrespondents perceive lower levels of procedural justice than respondents and passive nonrespondents.*

#### **Perceived organizational support**

Organizational members who perceive low organizational support may consciously decide that there is no reason for them to contribute by completing organizationally sponsored surveys. Perceived organizational support (POS), or organizational members' "global beliefs concerning the extent to which

the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being'' (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; p. 698) is predictive of attitudes as well as organizational members' willingness to reciprocate by engaging in desirable task and contextual performance behavior. Organizational support theory postulates that organizational members view organizations as having humanlike features (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Organization members then view actions organizational representatives take as indicators of their organization's motives and intentions. Behaviors of these organizational representatives are then interpreted as to whether they are granted voluntarily and on the basis of choice. If organizational members feel this is the case, they are inclined to reciprocate by demonstrating behavior in support of the organization's welfare (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002).

Hence, we hypothesized that respondents to organizational surveys perceive their organization as supportive, and thus feel a need to demonstrate their commitment to the organization by complying with organizational requests for survey completion. Passive nonrespondents are, as they have not been found to differ from respondents on most attitudinal variables, also expected to perceive the level of POS as adequate. We thus expected passive nonrespondents, who were found to differ from respondents on personality dimensions such as conscientiousness rather than on satisfaction and commitment (Rogelberg et al., 2003), to perceive similar levels of POS as respondents. In contrast, we hypothesized active nonrespondents, or those who consciously decide not to participate in organizational surveys, to feel their organization has not provided the expected level of organizational support.

*Hypothesis 2: Active nonrespondents perceive lower levels of organizational support than passive nonrespondents and respondents.*

### **Social exchange**

Social exchange relationships refer to an individual's perception of the mutual exchange of socio-emotional resources between himself or herself and the organization (Blau, 1964; Shore & Barksdale, 1998). That is, relationships characterized by an expectation of social exchange emphasize that both parties in the exchange are obligated to provide resources that communicate concern and regard for the other party. Further, people who expect their organization to provide them with socio-emotional resources maintain balance and trust by contributing resources to the organization that demonstrate similar levels of concern and regard (Foa & Foa, 1975). For example, the expectation of socio-emotional resources has been linked to outcomes such as trust and affective commitment (Millward & Hopkins, 1998), and organizational citizenship behavior (Coyle-Shapiro & Kessler, 2002).

Given that social exchange relationships have been linked to OCB and that survey response is a type of OCB, we suggest that relationships characterized by social exchange promote survey response. Specifically, if organizational members perceive their exchange relationships as being long-term, built on trust and centering on diffuse, socio-emotional obligations, they should be likely to reciprocate by completing organizational surveys. Hence, we hypothesized that organizational members with positive social exchange experiences participate in surveys, or at least form intentions to participate (e.g., being passive nonrespondents). Again, we did not expect differences between passive nonrespondents and respondents due to findings of past research on passive nonresponse: passive nonrespondents are less likely to respond due to low conscientiousness, but not due to differences in attitudes (Rogelberg et al., 2003). In contrast, we anticipated that individuals who perceive their social exchange relationship with their organization to be weaker to make a conscious decision to not respond to organizations' requests to complete surveys.

*Hypothesis 3: Active nonrespondents evaluate their social exchange relationship with their organization less favorably than respondents and passive nonrespondents.*

### Reciprocation wariness

Researchers have long recognized the role of personality in relationships involving reciprocity (Eisenberger et al., 1987; Gouldner, 1960). As a result, we now recognize that individuals' reactions to their organizational experiences are likely to not only be a result of events they encounter at work, but a consequence of both the effects of organizational experiences *and* personality (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Research on helping behavior and reciprocity in organizational behavior has identified reciprocation wariness, or individuals' "general fear of exploitation in interpersonal relationships" (Cotterrell et al., 1992, p. 658; Eisenberger et al., 1987) as a personality antecedent of individuals' likelihood to engage in activities benefiting others. Studies on reciprocation wariness and helping behaviors in social relationships found that students who were high on reciprocation wariness were less likely to be involved in cooperative and social exchange behaviors with peers (Cotterrell et al., 1992). In fact, this fear of exploitation led wary study participants to be less likely to reciprocate others' acts of kindness, or to be responsive to others' needs.

Thus, if response to organizational surveys is a helping behavior geared toward the organization, then individuals high on reciprocation wariness should be concerned about possible exploitation when organizational representatives request survey participation. In addition, reciprocation-wary individuals should be less inclined to perceive benefits they obtain from their organization than those low in reciprocation wariness. As a consequence, high-wary individuals are probably less inclined to feel the need to reciprocate and help their organization. Hence, we propose that individuals high on reciprocation wariness form fewer intentions to participate in organizational surveys than individuals low on reciprocation wariness. Therefore, respondents to organizational surveys should be low on reciprocation wariness. Similarly, passive nonrespondents, who formed intentions to participate in surveys but fail to comply with actual requests for survey completion should also be lower on reciprocation wariness than active nonrespondents, or those who consciously decide they will not participate in organizational surveys.

*Hypothesis 4:* Active nonrespondents are more reciprocation-wary than respondents and passive nonrespondents.

## Method

### *Overview of population profiling*

Based on our review of previously used methods (see Rogelberg et al., 2003; Rogelberg & Luong, 1998 for review) to detect nonresponse bias, we chose a longitudinal, experimental methodology for the study of potential nonresponse bias in our field setting (Rogelberg et al., 2003). Population profiling is a three-step approach to measuring nonresponse. The first step is to survey a "captive audience" in order to obtain information from individuals who would not normally respond to requests for survey participation. In this step, participants provide information about variables related to nonresponse, intentions to complete future surveys, and contact information. The second step in population profiling is to administer a follow-up survey to wave I participants. In this step, the primary concern is *response behavior* rather than content of the survey. The third step in population profiling is to categorize participants as respondents, active nonrespondents, or passive nonrespondents. Participants are



categorized based on their stated response intentions in the step I survey and their response behavior to the follow up survey.

### *Participants*

Six hundred and twenty-two upper-division business students from a large urban Southwestern university participated in the present study. The population surveyed was composed of 52 per cent women and the mean age was 23 years. Thirty-four per cent of the sample was Caucasian, with 9 per cent being African-American, 27 per cent being Asian-American, 20 per cent being Hispanic, and 10 per cent categorizing their ethnicity as "other."

## **Organizational Context**

### **External Environment**

The university setting at the institution where the study was conducted is a large urban research university with a predominantly ethnic minority student population and is located in a low-income neighborhood of the fourth largest city in the United States. The majority of undergraduates work full-time, and commute between ten and forty miles to get to class. In contrast to other institutions the university imposes no limit on the number of semesters a student can take to complete his or her education to support students pursuing a degree part-time. As a result, our sample lends itself well to demographic analyses: student diversity in terms of age, ethnic background, and employment history far exceeds the diversity of traditional, non-commuter campuses. Furthermore, in contrast to most large undergraduate universities, students spend less time on campus—extracurricular activities on campus are somewhat scarce and students' social life is not usually centered on the university. Thus, pride in and identification with the university is probably not as strong as it may be at other large universities with a more traditional undergraduate student body. The University is also somewhat unique in that it appears to have a weaker central administration, with more decision latitude in the colleges and departments than what could be found at most other institutions.

### **Office of Institutional Research**

The university's Office of Institutional Research routinely carries out survey projects for staff and students, and reports directly to university administrators in charge of organizational development and change processes. The Office of Institutional Research regularly obtains response rates ranging from 10 to 60 per cent for most of their surveys (with web-surveys, on average, leading to lower response rates than mail surveys). Surveys are sponsored by administrative units, and generally cover topics ranging from staff satisfaction with benefits and pay to surveys devoted to student satisfaction with university services, instructor and college performance, and satisfaction with technology and diversity.

### **Timeline**

Data collection was accomplished during spring and summer 2004, and the follow-up survey was administered early fall 2004.

## *Procedure*

In the first wave of data collection, we supplemented the Office of Institutional Research's standard student survey instrument on satisfaction with technology and university services with items measuring intentions to complete future organizational surveys, procedural justice, perceived organizational support, social exchange and reciprocity wariness, and the individuals' contact information (e.g., name and e-mail). In order to gain access to a near 100 per cent response rate, and thus access to both respondents and those who usually do not comply with requests to complete organizational surveys, we administered our initial survey in a closed setting, during class-time in undergraduate business administration courses. A team of graduate research assistants went to all classes to collect the data. One graduate research assistant introduced the project as a student satisfaction survey being conducted by the Office of Institutional Research and the Department of Psychology, and emphasized that survey results would be used by the University to improve student life. Surveys were then distributed and collected; research assistants responded to questions and ensured that the near 100 per cent response rate was actually obtained.

The second wave of data collection occurred several weeks later. Respondents' personal information was used to solicit another request for survey participation via e-mail. In particular, respondents to our wave 1 survey were asked to complete a brief, web-based survey about university shopping and dining options conducted by the Office of Institutional Research. As is customary for the Office of Institutional Research's efforts, a \$200 raffle incentive was used to enhance response rates.

## *Wave 1 measures*

Procedural justice was measured with a modified version of Blader and Tyler's (2003) five-item procedural justice scale. Scale items were modified to reflect perceptions of procedural justice in a university setting. The scale assesses one's perceptions of the fairness of organizational procedures on a 5-point Likert-type response scale (strongly disagree/strongly agree), and demonstrated acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = 0.90$ ). An example item is "Overall, decisions and processes at this university are fair."

Perceived organizational support was measured with a modified version of Eisenberger, et al.'s (1986) eight-item scale. Again, the scale was modified to fit the university context. The POS scale is scored on a 5-point Likert-type response scale (strongly disagree/strongly agree), and demonstrated acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = 0.83$ ). An example item is "The university shows very little concern for me." (reverse scored).

Social exchange was measured with a modified version of Shore et al.'s (in press) eight-item social exchange scale. This scale is scored on a 5-point Likert-type response scale (strongly disagree/strongly agree) and assesses perceptions of social-emotional exchanges between the student and the university ( $\alpha = 0.77$ ). An example item is "There is a lot of give and take in my relationship with this university."

Individual differences in exchange preferences were measured with Eisenberger, et al.'s (1987) eight-item reciprocity wariness scale. This scale is scored on a 5-point Likert-type response scale (strongly disagree/strongly agree) and assesses one's concerns about being exploited in social situations and exchange relationships ( $\alpha = 0.91$ ). Sample items are "It generally pays to let others do more for you than you do for them," "The most realistic policy is to take more from others than you give," and "When I help someone, I often find myself thinking about what is in it for me."

Response intentions were measured with one item that assessed intentions to complete an organizational survey on a 5-point Likert response scale (strongly disagree/strongly agree). Intentions were



used to assess nonresponse because previous research has shown specific intentions to be robust predictors of behavior (Kim & Hunter, 1993). The intentions item for this study ("I intend to complete the next student survey conducted by this university.") was developed in line with Rogelberg et al.'s (2003) development of intention items, as well as based on recommendations on the development of intentions items for the prediction of future behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). We chose a one-item measure instead of a multi-item scale to assess intentions to complete future surveys for two reasons. First, we wanted the intentions component of the survey to be rather small to minimize the chance that wave I respondents would remember their self-reported intentions and would try to act accordingly instead of the way they would if they had not completed our wave I survey. Second, our survey items were added to an existing survey and survey space was at a premium.

## Analyses

After participants were classified into the three groups (active nonrespondents, passive nonrespondents, and respondents), a MANOVA and planned comparisons were used to compare active nonrespondents, passive nonrespondents, and respondents on procedural justice, POS, and social exchange variables. An ANOVA and planned comparisons were used to compare active nonrespondents, passive nonrespondents, and respondents on reciprocation wariness. Furthermore, on the basis of their actual response behavior and their intentions to respond to a satisfaction survey, we conducted chi-square tests and ANOVAs to assess possible differences in demographic variables between the groups.

## Results

Table 1 displays zero-order correlations and overall sample means and standard deviations for the variables of interest. Table 2 displays the means and standard deviations for the variables of interest by response group (e.g., active versus passive nonrespondents versus respondents).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations between variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Procedural justice	3.12	0.78	(0.90)							
2. Perceived organization support	3.05	0.59	0.50**	(0.83)						
3. Social exchange	3.21	0.60	0.36**	0.49**	(0.77)					
4. Reciprocation wariness	2.07	0.65	-0.01	-0.11**	0.00	(0.91)				
5. Gender	—	—	0.00	-0.03	-0.01	-0.14**	—			
6. Years in university	3.09	0.78	0.02	-0.05	-0.09*	-0.11**	0.00	—		
7. Age	22.88	4.39	0.13**	0.06	0.00	-0.15**	-0.04	0.35**	—	
8. Hours worked/week	20.55	14.69	-0.07	-0.11**	-0.10**	-0.08	-0.08*	0.15**	0.05	—

*Note:* Cronbach's coefficient alpha is shown on the diagonal. Gender was coded as 1 = Male and 2 = Female. Dashes indicate that the reliability, mean, and standard deviation were not estimated. \*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Table 2. Means, standard deviations, and sample size for variables by group

Variable	Active nonrespondents			Passive nonrespondents			Respondents		
	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Procedural justice	87	2.81	0.86	455	3.19	0.74	66	3.33	0.75
Perceived organizational support	87	2.86	0.59	454	3.09	0.60	66	3.10	0.55
Social exchange	89	2.85	0.70	463	3.27	0.56	67	3.31	0.64
Reciprocation wariness	89	2.25	0.75	463	2.06	0.62	69	2.00	0.71

### *Preliminary analyses*

*Categorizing groups of respondents and nonrespondents.* Participants were classified as respondents or nonrespondents on the basis of their actual behavior in response to the follow-up survey. Participants who returned the follow-up survey were placed in the respondent category (11 per cent,  $n = 69$ ), whereas participants who did not return the follow-up survey were placed in the nonrespondent category. Next, nonrespondents were further separated into two groups—active nonrespondents and passive nonrespondents—on the basis of their intention to respond to a satisfaction survey. Nonrespondents who reported that they would not complete a satisfaction survey for the organization were categorized as active nonrespondents (14 per cent,  $n = 89$ ); all other nonrespondents were categorized as passive nonrespondents (75 per cent,  $n = 464$ ). Note that our findings replicate Rogelberg et al. (2003) – their study also found about 13 per cent of their population to be active nonrespondents.

### *Test of hypotheses*

The objective of our study was to examine whether survey nonresponse can be an individual's way of "getting even" with their organization, or as the result of unjust organizational decision-making policies, low perceived organizational support, and social exchange with the organization. In addition, we examined whether survey nonrespondents are more prone to feel exploited in social relationships than respondents. To examine differences between respondents and nonrespondents, we conducted a one-way MANOVA, with one independent variable that has three levels (active nonrespondents, passive nonrespondents, and respondent) and three dependent variables (procedural justice, perceived organizational support, and social exchange). The present sample is characterized by discrepant samples sizes for each response category and lack of homogeneity of variance across groups [Box's  $M = 47.622$ ,  $F(12, 153005.8) = 3.91$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ]; as such we utilized Pillai's Trace F-statistic (Olson, 1979). Pillai's Trace F-statistic can be interpreted as an omnibus significance test similar to Wilk's Lambda, but is more appropriate for discrepant sample sizes in different groups. For large degrees of freedom, Pillai's Trace and Wilk's Lambda are equivalent (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). In order to present all necessary statistical information, we provided the results of the omnibus test, as well as information about planned comparison results and effect sizes. As an effect size, we chose Cohen's  $d$ , which expresses group differences in units of standard deviations, with  $d = 0.20$  reflecting a small effect,  $d = 0.50$  a medium effect, and  $d = 0.80$  a large effect (Cohen, 1992).

Hypotheses 1 through 3 predicted that respondents and active nonrespondents differ with respect to procedural justice, perceived organizational support and social exchange. Significant multivariate effects were obtained, Pillai's Trace = 0.08,  $F(6, 1196) = 7.90$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ , followed by

specific, planned comparisons testing hypothesis about differences in procedural justice, perceived organizational support and social exchange.

Hypothesis 1 predicted that active nonrespondents report lower levels of procedural justice than do respondents and passive nonrespondents. Results show that active nonrespondents felt, more so than respondents and passive nonrespondents, that organizational decision-making policies that lead to the allocation of resources in the organization were unjust. As predicted, active nonrespondents viewed the organization to be less procedurally just ( $M = 2.81$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ) than did respondents ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ),  $t(605) = 4.26$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $d = -0.64$  and passive nonrespondents ( $M = 3.19$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ),  $t(605) = 4.29$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $d = -0.50$ .

Hypothesis 2 posited that active nonrespondents report lower levels of perceived organizational support than do respondents and passive nonrespondents, respectively. Results supported these hypotheses; active nonrespondents felt, in comparison to respondents and passive nonrespondents, that their organization provided insufficient organizational support. In other words, active nonrespondents reported that the organization was less supportive ( $M = 2.86$ ,  $SD = 0.59$ ) than did respondents ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 0.55$ ),  $t(604) = 2.47$ ,  $p = 0.01$ ,  $d = -0.42$ , and passive nonrespondents ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 0.60$ ),  $t(604) = 3.29$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $d = -0.38$ .

Hypothesis 3 predicted that active nonrespondents would perceive their social exchange relationship with their organization as weaker than respondents and passive nonrespondents. In fact, our results support that active nonrespondents experience lower levels of social exchange with their organization than do respondents and passive nonrespondents, respectively. Results indicated that active nonrespondents were less likely to experience social exchange in relationships ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) than were respondents ( $M = 3.31$ ,  $SD = 0.64$ ),  $t(147.92) = 4.34$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $d = -0.69$  and passive nonrespondents ( $M = 3.27$ ,  $SD = 0.56$ ),  $t(110.53) = 5.46$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $d = -0.74$ .

Furthermore, we expected active nonrespondents to be more likely to be high on reciprocation wariness than respondents and passive nonrespondents. In other words, we anticipated organizational members with a personality disposition to feel exploited in social exchange relationships to be more likely to consciously decide to not engage in survey response behavior. To examine individual differences in exchange preferences between respondents and nonrespondents, we conducted a one-way ANOVA, and examined planned comparisons. Active nonrespondents were found to be more likely to feel exploited in social relationships—they reported higher levels of reciprocation wariness than respondents and passive nonrespondents. Results also supported hypothesis 4, indicating that active nonrespondents ( $M = 2.25$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ) were more likely to fear being taken advantage of than were respondents ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ),  $t(618) = -2.40$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $d = 0.34$ , and passive nonrespondents ( $M = 2.06$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ),  $t(618) = -2.50$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $d = 0.29$ .

### Relationships with demographic variables

Respondents and nonrespondents were compared on demographic and work-related background variables. In particular, we tested for these effects to examine whether demographic differences in nonresponse detected in previous research (e.g., Rogelberg et al., 2003) were present in our sample (e.g., females, older individuals and whites being more likely to respond).

Respondents, active nonrespondents, and passive respondents differed with respect to gender with more women being respondents and more men being active nonrespondents,  $\chi^2(2, n = 620) = 9.88$ ,  $p < 0.05$ , which replicates findings in previous research on differences between respondents and nonrespondents (Rogelberg & Luong, 1998). However, respondents, active nonrespondents, and passive nonrespondents did not differ with respect to ethnic group membership  $\chi^2(8, n = 612) = 4.87$  or with respect to age  $F(2, 619) = 70$ , n.s. Similarly, results indicated that respondents, active nonrespondents, and passive nonrespondents did not differ in the number of hours worked per week,  $F(2, 578) = 1.40$ , n.s.

As gender was found to relate to response behavior in our study, the MANOVA and ANOVA were rerun controlling for gender. Effects for procedural justice, perceived organizational support and social exchange continued to be significant. However, when gender was entered as a covariate in our analyses on reciprocation wariness, results showed that survey response did not account for additional variance in reciprocation wariness after gender was entered as a covariate,  $F(2, 615) = 2.64$ , n.s. Note that reciprocation wariness and gender were positively related in this study in that males are more likely to be higher on reciprocation wariness than females. Thus, entering gender as a covariate may have controlled for substantive variance related to reciprocation wariness, ultimately leading to the nonsignificant findings for reciprocation wariness after gender is entered as a control variable.

## Discussion

In this study, we proposed and tested an exchange based theoretical framework for survey nonresponse. Using a set of variables theoretically and empirically related to organizational citizenship behaviors, we developed our hypotheses. In particular, we examined whether the decision to not complete organizational surveys may reflect a response to perceived unfairness of organizational decision-making and low perceived organizational support. In addition, we examined if the strength of social exchange relationships would relate to survey nonresponse. Furthermore, we examined whether nonrespondents had a stronger disposition to feel exploited in social situations than respondents.

Findings of this study support the relevance of theoretical and empirical findings from the organizational citizenship behavior literature for the study of survey nonresponse. Variables that have been found to be predictive of organizational citizenship behaviors appear to be highly relevant for the study of survey nonresponse: procedural justice, perceived organizational support and social exchange, which had all been identified as antecedents of organizational citizenship behavior (Niehoff & Moorman, 1993; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Shore & Tetrick, 1994) predicted active nonresponse. This supports the notion that survey response might be a form of OCB-O or generalized compliance, a citizenship behavior geared toward assisting one's organization in attaining its goals (Williams & Anderson, 1991). Our investigation of reciprocation wariness, an exchange-oriented personality variable that has been found to be predictive of helping behavior in social situations (Cotterrell et al., 1992), further supported the notion that survey response can be meaningfully studied under a theoretical framework derived from research on helping behaviors.

These findings are in line with past research on nonresponse and organizational citizenship behavior. Rogelberg et al. (2003) found conscientiousness and agreeableness to be predictive of nonresponse. Similarly, past research has identified conscientiousness and agreeableness to relate to organizational citizenship behaviors (Organ & Ryan, 1995). Although this study provides further evidence pertaining to similarities between survey response behaviors and OCBs, future research should examine whether survey response does in fact relate to OCBs. In particular, examinations of whether survey response relates more strongly to facets pertaining to OCBs geared toward helping other organizational members or the organization itself may be informative.

For research on procedural justice, perceived organizational support and social exchange, this study has not only methodological, but also theoretical implications. First, all three constructs appear to not only relate to what is generally assessed as one's citizenship behavior (e.g., Colquitt, 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), but also to more specific helping behaviors such as compliance with requests for survey completion. The majority of research on the three constructs has been conducted cross-sectionally (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Thus, the current paper further contributes to establishing

the relevance of procedural justice, perceived organizational support and social exchange for actual helping behaviors that are assessed longitudinally.

### *Implications*

For consultants, HR practitioners and researchers conducting organizational surveys, findings of this study have a variety of implications. First, an exchange-based framework can explain past attitudinal differences that have been detected between respondents, passive nonrespondents and active nonrespondents. For example, the lower levels of satisfaction reported by active nonrespondents than by respondents and passive nonrespondents (Rogelberg et al., 2000) can be explained through an exchange-based model. In other words, people who perceive low levels of procedural justice, perceived organizational support and social exchange with their organization may be less likely to respond to surveys because survey response is a contribution that helps the organization. This is consistent with previous research by Coyle-Shapiro and Kessler (2002) and Shore and Barksdale (1998), which indicated that people strive to maintain balance in their relationships. Similarly, it suggests that active nonrespondents, with their conscious decision not to respond, might view nonresponse as a way to restore balance and “pay back” the organization (Bies & Tripp, 2005).

Second, this study provides further support for the notion that respondents and passive nonrespondents do not differ in their perceptions of relevant organizational processes. However, they do differ significantly from active nonrespondents, who perceive lower levels of procedural justice, organizational support and social exchange. Fourteen per cent of the population in our study turned out to be active nonrespondents, 75 per cent of the respondents to our initial survey were classified as passive nonrespondents, and about 11 per cent were actual respondents to our follow-up web-survey. This closely replicates Rogelberg et al.'s (2003) findings. As a consequence, we conclude that while respondent based findings translate to passive nonrespondents, they do not appear to generalize to active nonrespondents.

Third, researchers and organizational survey practitioners who frequently invest substantial effort and financial resources to gain access to larger samples sizes may have to wonder whether increases in sample sizes that can be reached through the use of methods such as Dillman's (2000) tailored design method are always worth the effort. Although substantial recruitment efforts may increase response rates, it appears to be the case that those most likely to be susceptible to these efforts are passive nonrespondents. Hence, future research on incentives for survey completion should focus on incentives that make survey participation of active nonrespondents more likely. From an organizational perspective, the findings of this study raise an interesting question: Should organizations be content knowing that organizational survey findings generalize to the majority of nonrespondents, or should they be concerned about the nonresponse bias that may be introduced by the substantively different experiences and attitudes of active nonrespondents?

Fourth, the majority of past research on procedural justice, social exchange and perceived organizational support may be subject to restriction of range. In particular, those with the most negative perceptions of the organization fail to complete surveys. Hence, the variability of procedural justice, social exchange, and organizational support are limited, which may mean that research on reciprocity and exchange may have underestimated the relationships between exchange variables and their correlates. At the same time, the influence of perceived procedural justice, perceived organizational support, and social exchange may only be influential in studies sponsored by an organization. Although the majority of organizational surveys may be presented as sponsored by the potential respondents' organization, research projects that explicitly indicate that the research to be completed is not representing the organization, but an independent research entity may not be affected by individuals' inclinations to

respond based on their organizational experience in the domains of justice, social support, and social exchange. As a result, we suggest replication of our study in other organizational settings where the initial population profiling survey can be introduced as an organizational survey. The follow-up measures could then come from an institution (e.g., research lab, consulting firm) that self-identifies on the survey as an independent researcher conducting research with the organization's consent instead of from an organizational representative. This could lead to further insight into the role of survey sponsorship in nonresponse bias.

### *Limitations and future research*

The current study seems to support the appropriateness of an exchange framework explanation of survey nonresponse. However, while we do find exchange-oriented variables to be predictive of survey nonresponse, we know little about the daily experiences and disappointments that may lead individuals who initially enter an organization by choice to disengage and not complete organizational surveys (Wanous, Reichers, & Malik, 1984). Research on socialization of organizational members into groups and organizational units may provide a fruitful venue for the study of these antecedents of nonresponse. Similarly, the role of organizational trust and trust in one's supervisor should be further examined.<sup>3</sup>

Although the current study did use organizational stakeholders—students—as participants, the types of exchange relationships students form with the universities they attend may be different from the exchange relationships employees develop with their employer. For instance, students' obligations toward their university are a lot smaller than the engagement organizations expect from their employees, which may lead to significantly different exchange relationships. Similarly, students do not depend on universities in terms of making a living. At the same time, both students and employees are subjected to evaluative mechanisms such as performance evaluations and grades, and students are subjected to power differentials somewhat similar to those of employees. In addition, relationships between variables detected in organizational behavior research and in research on students share similar findings. For instance, turnover and retention for student populations seem to be driven by factors similar in nature to those that influence employee turnover and retention (e.g., Johns, 2002; Watson, Johnson, & Austin, 2004). As a consequence, while we would expect the relationships identified here to replicate in employee samples, we suggest further research examine whether this is actually the case.

For further progress in our quest for organizational members' rationale for survey nonresponse, it seems crucial for researchers to gain access to employee field samples. Despite obvious challenges in recruiting organizations to participate in studies using population profiling, the method may lend itself to being conducted in organizational settings where employees complete wave I surveys as mandatory components of organizational programs. For instance, the use of training and staff orientation programs may prove to be valuable in future research devoted to the investigation of nonresponse. However, in conducting population profiling studies in organizational settings, particular attention needs to be paid to the way "population data" is collected. Issues surrounding the coercion of participants in employment settings are likely to arise and need to be addressed.

The current study, as well as the Rogelberg et al. (2003) study, have failed to detect significant differences between respondents and passive nonrespondents in perceptions of justice, perceived organizational support, social exchange, organizational commitment, and satisfaction. Lower levels of trait

<sup>3</sup>The idea that trust may fit the proposed exchange framework and should thus also be examined in future research was brought to our attention by an anonymous reviewer.



conscientiousness may serve as one explanation for why, despite similar intentions, one group of individuals completes the survey, while the other group fails to follow-up. Hence, it may be of interest for future research to examine passive nonrespondents and the reasons why they fail to follow up on their intentions more closely. Variables such as affective personality traits and organizational cynicism may prove informative.

Future research on nonresponse should also pursue the notion that nonresponse may be a form of counterproductive retaliatory work behavior, geared toward re-establishing justice by not completing organizational surveys (e.g., Bies & Tripp, 2005). Interestingly, research on counterproductive work behavior has started to explore the role of emotions in uncivil, deviant, and abusive behavior (Allred, 1999). Thus, examining the role of emotions and emotional traits in survey response may constitute a promising area for future research.

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